

Centenarian's birthday celebrates lifetime of service

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PORT JERVIS – Lifelong local resident Rayola McLaughlin recently added the title “centenarian” to her long list of accomplishments.

Even before COVID-19 lowered the boom on big parties, McLaughlin requested a quiet, simple birthday, with no parties planned.

Friends old and new described McLaughlin as humble, reserved, and quiet.

Joan Rowlands was a young Girl Scout in McLaughlin's Troop 8 in the early 1940s. She became a lifelong friend.

While unable to visit in person on her birthday, Rowlands and longtime friend Lou Harford were among the many who sent wishes for McLaughlin's 100th birthday.

“Rayola went to school with my sister, Helen Oliver. She became my scout leader and close friend. In later years, Lou and I would go visit every Sunday. We would reminisce about past times and people, all good things,” said Rowlands, who continued those frequent visits until last month.

A proclamation naming the day in McLaughlin's honor, a photo board of bridal parties she outfitted and served, and many cards sent over the past month were among the birthday greetings.

“She's just a good person,” Harford said. “She's funny, generous, and religious. She's had at least three audiences with the pope, including a private visit with Pope John at the Vatican. She was on a committee in Rome and worked with Cardinal Dolan even before he was a cardinal.”

McLaughlin, born to Robert and Mary McLaughlin on March 20, 1920, was delivered at a hospital then on Sussex Street, near the current post office. Her family lived on King Street in “the Acre,” which McLaughlin remembers as an Irish neighborhood at the time, before it became an Italian neighborhood.

“I went to St. Mary’s School through the eighth grade and graduated from Port Jervis High School in 1938 – I think with Kathryn Simmons,” McLaughlin recalled. “We wore navy skirts and white blouses at St. Mary’s, and always dresses – not pants – in high school. Students were always dressed well.”

Among her first jobs, McLaughlin was a clerk at Modern Modes Dress Shop, located then at the corner of Ball and Sussex streets. During her years at this store, among other experiences, she and the owner, identified in newspapers at the time as Mrs. Fred Eichbaum, helped Port Jervis Police Chief Stewart Rippon catch someone who was wanted by the FBI. The customer tried to fraudulently cash checks at Modern Modes, but Eichbaum and McLaughlin recognized her. According to newspaper accounts, Eichbaum stalled the woman with small talk while McLaughlin retreated to a back room and telephoned the chief.

McLaughlin owned her own bridal dress shop, Town and Country Bridal Shop, for decades.

Mary Rita Cortright, Katherine Lemon, and Barbara Drew were among many brides who recalled the joy in wedding planning with McLaughlin and others at the shop, including seamstresses Catherine Rybak and Louise Piccarello, and saleswomen Annette Codichini, Mary Cashman, and Ceil Mullaly.

“It was Rayola and only Rayola who waited on you,” Cortright said. “You tried your dress on, she zippered it up, and it was Rayola who made your wedding day go perfectly. She thought of everything; even having two pairs of nylons just in case.”

Lemon agreed, noting McLaughlin’s caring attention to every detail for every bride.

“She made every bride feel like she was her own daughter,” said Lemon. “I wanted to let her know how much this meant, which is why I brought the poster board with bridal memories on it to her window for her birthday.”

While she did not have children of her own, McLaughlin did attend many weddings, fussing over and each bride with great pride.

“I would drive to the house on the day of the wedding,” McLaughlin said, smiling as she recalled. “Brides loved that. I would also go to the church to make sure everything was right, and stayed right up through when they said, ‘I do.’ I would flip the train and make sure it was perfect. I wanted to make sure their wedding was everything they wanted it to be.”

McLaughlin said over time weddings became much less detailed and formal, and bigger stores gradually replaced hometown bridal shops.

“It was so different then,” she said. “I was also involved in Catholic Daughters, and I began travelling a lot. I did many of the fittings and alterations at night.”

McLaughlin, always active and involved in her community and church, held a national position of leadership in which travelled globally for several years. After holding positions at local and state levels in the 1960s and '70s, McLaughlin was elected National Regent for Catholic Daughters of the Americas at a convention in Philadelphia and served in that position from 1986-1990. During this time, and later, she was honored with many awards presented in person by popes, bishops, and even President George W. Bush.

Barbara Drew, who also held leadership positions in Catholic Daughters of the Americas, praised McLaughlin's commitment to her faith and community. Drew said she met McLaughlin after going to work at the Grand Union on Sussex Street in 1956.

“As soon as I started earning a paycheck, I became a customer at Rayola's store,” Drew recalled.

When Drew and her husband, Dick, set their wedding date, McLaughlin helped them have everything ready in just three months.

“It was different in 1962. You didn't need a whole year to get ready like now,” Drew recalled. “Rayola would meet us at night for fittings, so nobody had to miss work. She bent over backwards and was 100 percent with you. The day of the wedding she came to my house, drove me to the church in her convertible, and was there until I was all the way down the aisle. Then she left.”

Drew said McLaughlin remained a role model for women in the church and her community. She said McLaughlin was among the people she turned to when she was ill a few years ago, as she had when her mother died.

Cathy Ewanciw said she is grateful to have become a part of McLaughlin's circle of friends in recent years. Ewanciw met McLaughlin while caring for a longtime best friend, Mary Wohlscheid, and later assisted in McLaughlin's care.

“Together we've shared lunches, church functions, pajama parties, and lots of laughs. It's an honor and a pleasure to know Rayola,” Ewanciw said. “She has known presidents, popes, and many other distinguished people, and she is a role model and friend to me.”

“She never married,” Cortright said. “She had other things to do in her life and she did them very well.”

When asked to reflect on that life, McLaughlin said simply that her life has been a good one.

“Faith has always been so important in my life,” McLaughlin said. “And it always will be.”